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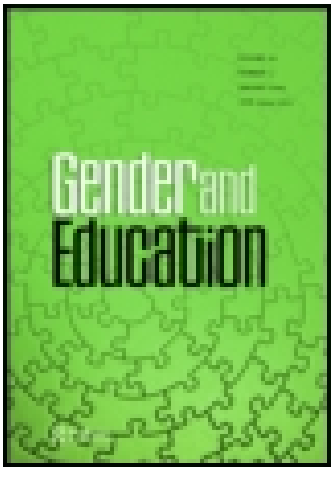

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Ella Westland [a]
[a] Department of Continuing and Adult Education , University of Exeter , United Kingdom
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Cinderella in the Classroom. Children's Responses to Gender Roles in Fairy-tales

ELLA WESTLAND, *Department of Continuing and Adult Education, University of Exeter, United Kingdom*

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ABSTRACT *The project described in this paper was designed to test the feminist hypothesis that the Cinderella-style fairy-tales promoted by Anglo-American society harmfully reinforce restrictive images of girlhood and womanhood. The research was based on work with over 100 boys and girls aged 9–11 in five Cornish primary schools. Responses came from the children through group discussion, drawing pictures and writing stories. Although the figure of the pretty princess predominated in the girls' pictures, it was apparent through the children's discussion and stories that few girls identified with this image. The girls favoured 'upside-down' fairy-tale scenarios that gave their heroines independence, while the boys clung to the traditional image of the prince for the same reason. These results indicate that girls of this age are 'resisting readers', able to criticise and manipulate—as well as enjoy—the gender images presented to them in the dominant fairy-tales of our culture.*

> The child who is fed tales such as *Snow White* is not told that the tale itself is a poisonous apple, and the Wicked Queen (her mother/teacher), having herself been drugged by the same deadly diet throughout her lifetime (death-time), is unaware of her venomous part in the patriarchal plot. (Daly, 1978)
>
> Princess Curly Locks sat at the top of a tree and took out a pen knife and carved I own this tree in big letters so everyone could see it. The King and Queen saw the writing and demanded to know who did it. Princess Curly Locks said that she had done it because she owned that tree. ('Princess Curly Locks and the Princes!', Sarah, age 11, 1990 [see Appendix 1])
>
> Remarkably little research has addressed the question of the actual effect of fairy tales on children. (Bottigheimer, 1987, p. 21)

Over the past 20 years, feminists have relentlessly attacked the type of fairy-tale promoted by Anglo-American culture, claiming that its gender stereotypes serve to reinforce those restrictive images of girlhood and womanhood that are already deep-rooted in our society:

> Most simply and clearly [the fairy-tale] tells the story of women in our culture, and simply states that they must be either innocent and beautiful, so passive

> that they are almost dead, or profoundly and monstrously evil: good mother, bad mother. (Steedman, 1982, pp. 141–142)

It is widely accepted that stories like Cinderella, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty have had a damaging effect on "masses of children", because they "serve to acculturate women to traditional social roles" (Lieberman, 1972, pp. 185–186), and perpetuate the myth of the happy-ever-after marriage. The project described in this paper set out to test this feminist hypothesis, and found that children may be more resistant to fairy-tale than we have been ready to admit.

Background

Classic feminist texts have memorably condemned the familiar fairy stories for encoding and therefore encouraging passive female behaviour, male domination and even rape (Dworkin, 1974, pp. 34–49; Brownmiller, 1975, pp. 309–310; Daly, 1978, p. 44; Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, pp. 36–44). Historical work on fairy-tale has shown how far its development depends on the dominant value system of the culture that appropriates it (Zipes, 1979; Bottigheimer, 1987); and populist books on female psychology, *The Cinderella Complex* (Dowling, 1981) and *The Cinderella Syndrome* (Ezell, 1985), have implied in their titles that there is a connection between the features of fairy-tale, where girls wait for godmothers and princes to come to their rescue, and women's fear of independence in their adult lives. One important counter-influence to this trend of thinking has been the work of Bruno Bettelheim, whose well-known book on *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) denied the relevance of gender considerations in fairy-tales on the basis that children identify with the appropriate character regardless of sex (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 226). However, Bettelheim's view has been repeatedly challenged, and both sides of the argument are now frequently aired not only in print but in college courses from Canada to Australia (e.g. Allen, 1986, pp. 14–17).

In the British education system over the same period, concern has spread about the wider issues of stereotyping in children's literature, with studies like Bob Dixon's *Catching Them Young* (1977) generally exposing assumptions about sex, race and class embedded in widely-read children's books, and teaching resources like the Inner London Education Authority's *Changing Stories* (Mellor *et al.*, 1984) specifically drawing children's attention to gender stereotypes in fairy-tales. Collections of traditional folk-tales of a different type, with active and resourceful heroines, began to appear on the children's shelves of British bookshops and libraries, together with new stories that turned gender stereotypes on their heads (see Appendix 2 for book list). The upside-down tale of 'The Practical Princess' (in Williams, 1978), for example, tells of the reaction of the lovely Princess Bedelia on finding herself imprisoned in a tower:

> 'Now then, pull yourself together,' she said sternly. 'If you sit waiting for a prince to rescue you, you may sit here forever. Be practical! If there's any rescuing to be done, you're going to have to do it yourself.'

Not only does she save herself, but also a prince under a sleeping spell, whom she marries at the end of the tale. In Roald Dahl's *Revolting Rhymes* (1982), still a great favourite with many children, the lethal Red Riding Hood specialises in dispatching wolves:

> The small girl smiles. One eyelid flickers.
> She whips a pistol from her knickers.
> She aims it at the creature's head
> And *bang bang bang*, she shoots him dead.

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By the end of the 1980s, books like *The Tough Princess* (Waddell & Benson, 1986), *The Wrestling Princess* (Corbalis, 1986), *The Karate Princess* (Strong, 1986) and *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986) were readily available in cheap editions. Though not all children encounter these texts, and not all teachers care about sexual stereotyping in the material they present to their classes, the extent to which feminist ideas of the 1970s penetrated British homes and schools during the 1980s can be seen as a remarkable success for gender consciousness-raising.

But the new wave of feminist fairy-tales has not altered the argument against the older stories, or undermined their popularity. Libraries, bookshops, supermarkets, junior school plays and village pantomimes continue to peddle pretty princesses; Ladybird Books are still selling the traditional tales in their thousands; Euro-Disney recently opened in France with a much-photographed Sleeping Beauty castle; and the Disney film of *Snow White* has been re-released on the main British film circuit, playing to packed half-term cinema audiences while this project was taking place. Feminists remain worried by the unabated commercial exploitation of fairy-tale images and the insatiable public appetite for their consumption. But should *Snow White* carry a warning that this story can seriously damage your child? This project was designed to find out.

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The Study

My aim was to examine the assumption that children respond uncritically to the classic fairy-tales, and run the risk of internalising the value system that governs the stories' representation of gender. I chose a classroom situation, working with a sample of over 100 boys and girls in the top junior forms of five Cornish schools, chosen because of their different socio-economic settings. Many of the children were likely to have had non-Cornish parents, but the county is not racially mixed, and these groups included only one Asian and one travelling child.

The class work took two mornings. On the first occasion, after discussion of some familiar fairy-tales and a reading of the Grimm version of *Snow White*, I asked the children to produce a picture of their favourite character from *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty* or *Cinderella*. This was an attempt to capture their immediate responses, and no particular emphasis was placed that morning on gender issues. On the second occasion, which was intended to gauge their more considered uses of fairy-tale motifs, we first talked about being princesses and princes, and the children named the 'best and worst thing' about being a princess/ prince/ girl/ boy. We read and circulated upside-down fairy-tales, including *The Tough Princess* (Waddell & Benson, 1986), *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986) and *Prince Cinders* (Cole, 1987), and the children were finally asked to write their own fairy stories on either a traditional or an upside-down model. Some of the schools developed the children's written work by allowing them to revise and illustrate their stories, or turn them into booklets.

The children were nearly all aged 10 and 11. Children of this age—even the boys—still admit to enjoying fairy-tales, but they are also old enough to be reasonably competent artists and fluent writers. This was crucially important for the project, as I had little time for oral work and depended on taking their pictures and stories away for analysis. In terms of their skill in handling stories, 10 and 11 year-olds are generally on the cusp between the child whose plots and characters must be black-and-white, with the hero or heroine finally triumphing against all adversities, and the teenager who can entertain the idea of mixed personalities and unhappy outcomes (Appleyard, 1990, pp.

63–64). They can begin therefore to modify the strict structures of fairy-tale with other fictional possibilities that they have learned from their experience of novels, comics, videos, television—and their own lives. It is also at this age that there is a measurable increase in children's awareness of gender roles and restrictions, and an ability to understand the origin of stereotypes (Short & Carrington, 1989, p. 37). It seemed therefore the best age to assess children's awareness of gender images in fairy tales, and the extent to which they had the desire and ability to manipulate them.

The Results

Below I summarise and analyse the children's pictures, their verbal and written comments, and—most important of all for this project—their stories.

(a) The Children's Pictures

The children's choice of subject for their pictures was highly predictable, with over half of them dividing neatly down gender lines. (There were variations between schools, but none that were immediately explicable in terms of their socio-economic settings.) The summary in Table I shows that over 40% of the girls in the sample portrayed a beautiful princess, clearly the dominant figure in classic fairy-tales with a lot of potential for a colourful picture. There are no grounds, however, for attempting a revisionist interpretation of the tales based on the prominence of the heroine. These princesses were uniformly lovely and beautifully dressed; only one was in rags, and she had long blonde hair and blue eyes. One girl even chose to reproduce an immaculately clothed and made-up Snow White in her glass coffin. These girls seemed happy playing with these conventional fairy-tale images, and I detected no criticism of their choice from other children.

Among the boys, only two decided to paint princesses; they gave no particular reasons for their choice, though one came from a travelling community, where weddings are lavish and brides wear gorgeous clothes. Only one child out of the whole sample painted a prince, explaining that he liked drawing horses. Nearly a quarter of the boys (11) portrayed ugly, angry or evil women: wicked stepmothers, witches, and mirrors reflecting ugly hags or evil spirits. Another quarter (11) bent the rules as far as they could to produce aggressive and macho representations of fierce huntsmen and wicked-looking dwarfs. Among the 22 pictures in these two categories, representing 44% of the boys' output, there are some violent and disturbing images.

A look at the complete table complicates the argument somewhat. It shows that 34 of

TABLE I. The Children's Pictures

Subject of picture	Girls	Boys	Total
Beautiful princess	25 (40%)	2	27
Wicked stepmother, witch, etc.	7	11 (22%)	18
Macho huntsman or dwarf	1	11 (22%)	12
Funny dwarf	19	15	34
Ugly sister	7	4	11
Prince	0	1	1
Other (animals, blank mirrors, etc.)	4	6	10
Total	63	50	113

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the 113 children (proportionately, more or less equally divided between girls and boys) chose to draw funny dwarfs, perhaps to show off their cartoon skills, but perhaps to avoid princesses, wicked stepmothers and scary huntsmen. If you add owls, pigs and butterflies (and other children would have chosen animals if they thought this was within the rules of the exercise), you get a total of nearly 40% of the children who did not pick obviously gendered subjects, and whose pictures could not be identified as male or female. (I have put ugly sisters in an intermediate category in Table I, for although in theory they might be interpreted as a gleeful attack on women, in practice they tended to be used for affectionate comic relief by girls as well as boys.)

I have treated the pictures as if they represented a free choice at some level of the children's psyche, but their decisions were of course circumscribed in many ways. Children in a classroom situation may simply be trying to execute a given exercise, ready to work within the rules of the teacher's game; if you ask for fairy-tale characters in this environment, princesses are what you are likely to get. Children who know they are weak at art will go for damage limitation—easy stereotypes or even blank mirrors. Peer group pressures, and the readiness to copy ideas when original inspiration is lacking, create clumps of recognisably similar pictures around work tables.

Nevertheless, there are prominent patterns here. Very few of the 57 pictures in the first three categories—making up half of the total of 113—could not be assigned accurately to girl or boy by a stranger. These pictures are clearly marked by gender, and the features of sexist fairy-tales allow the divergent tendencies of boys and girls to show up with alarming clarity. The findings from this part of the project seemed to suggest that feminist fears of the harmful influence of fairy tales would be vindicated.

(b) The Children's Comments

However, the children's comments on gender roles in fairy-tales at once put their pictures in a very different perspective. The girls' reactions were particularly striking. In spite of the fact that so many of them had indulged in painting princesses, the girls were almost unanimous in denying that they would like to be princesses themselves. There were of course several strands to be unpicked in this response. The treatment of the royal family by the tabloid press no doubt had a negative influence on some girls' views of a princess's life, just as their pre-pubertal repugnance towards the boys sitting at the next table might explain the disgust that other girls expressed at being kissed by a prince. But alongside these superficial remarks, what came across strongly in many of the girls' comments was the desire for independence. No-one was prepared to admit that the 'best thing' about being a princess was having a prince to protect you. There were no outward signs of any Cinderella complexes here.

Most of the boys, on the other hand, liked the idea of being a prince. The disadvantages (primarily, having to save and marry princesses) were clearly outweighed by the advantages of wealth and power, which the boys easily translated into running kingdoms, driving fast cars, and spending 'loads of money'. Whereas the girls perceived princesses as having unattractively restricted lives, the boys saw princes as being able to do as they liked. There was general emphasis on the physical attributes of princes, who were assumed to be strong and athletic in their pursuits, and one group of boys complained about the upside-down story of *Prince Cinders* (Cole, 1987) because he was not merely poor but skinny and spotty as well. The boys were reluctant even to contemplate reincarnation as a prince who was not tough and good looking. (This fails to explain why they did not choose to paint princes in their pictures; it may be because they felt limited

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by the visual trappings of traditional dress, and found it easier in pictorial form to privilege the dramatically evil over the merely rich and powerful.) Their representations of the huntsman from the Grimms' *Snow White* add an interesting dimension here, since the boys all denied him his role of gentle helper and turned him into a frightening figure with a bloody axe. No one was interested in speaking up for sympathetic, non-standard heroes.

The children's reactions to this question about becoming princesses and princes related closely to their comments on the 'best and worst thing' about being a girl or a boy. Girls frequently complained about things they were *not* allowed to do—playing football and wearing trousers in school were repeatedly mentioned in this connection—and girls from working-class areas complained about the domestic chores assigned to them now and after marriage. The slim advantage of being a girl was said to be 'getting away with more than boys'. Boys' answers complemented this by seeing sports like football as a major advantage. They seemed to feel that they had more choice and control in their lives, though they paid for it by 'getting told off' more than girls. A couple of boys could not think of anything bad about being a boy at all! The children saw princesses and princes as representing more extreme versions of the gender models they experienced themselves: princesses had the most negative associations of girlhood (summed up in the notion of having to wear pretty dresses *all* the time), whereas princes had the positive advantages of boyhood with the added attraction of adult independence.

(c) The Children's Stories

The stories revealed a pattern as sharp as the pictures, only this time the views reflected in the children's comments about gender showed up in their work. (As with the pictures, there was no discernible correlation at this level of analysis between types of story and the schools' social mix.) The categories listed in Table II arose out of my first readings of the stories as a batch. The first four groups of tales, which account for more than half the work, stood out because of their distinct similarities. The 'tomboy princess' label describes the qualities of the main character; 'macho' and 'bloody/evil' cover a style of story-telling where gratuitous violence appears either in the main action or in the circumstantial detail of the story; the 'straight' tales approximate to traditional patterns. Below that line, categorisation was more difficult. 'Domestic' tales are disguised stories of home life (or television 'soaps'), often featuring divorce; 'moral' tales celebrate traditional virtues (e.g. a wizard forces Princess Bossy to keep walking in big boots until she says the magic word 'please'). 'Other upside-down' stories play with the conventions, but not in ways that have gender implications, and the 'uncategorisable' work was either incomprehensible or hardly begun. This is a simple and subjective classification, but further study bore out its usefulness.

The number of girls (43%) who jumped gleefully at the chance of writing tomboy princess tales was the most remarkable feature of the whole collection, particularly when contrasted with the 40% of girls who had chosen pretty princesses for their pictures. In these stories, often closely modelled on published upside-down tales, princesses are not glamorous but ordinary, and assert their independence by refusing to wear frocks, practising martial sports, winning forklift truck races, killing bears, cheeking their teachers and parents, and choosing or rejecting their own suitors. My favourite story from this group, and the most polished, is 'Princess Curly Locks and the Princes!', which appears in Appendix 1 for everyone to enjoy. Like the other girls' tomboy princesses, Curly Locks is a feisty character who knows her own mind. She owes a debt to stories

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TABLE II. The children's stories

Category of story	Girls		Boys		Total
Tomboy princess	23	(43%)	4*		27
Especially macho	0		6	(25%)	6
Especially bloody/evil	2		6		8
Straight (plot and gender roles)	5	(30%)	11	(23%)	16
Domestic/moral	11		4		15
Other upside-down	9		13		22
Uncategorisable	3		4		7
Total	53		48		101

*Two were *anti*-tomboy princess tales.

like *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1986), and her 'Panty Power' is presumably inspired by the knickers of Roald Dahl's Red Riding Hood, but she goes beyond these role models in her bloodcurdling methods of dispatching unwanted men. Adult readers cannot help being a little alarmed by the violence, by the sexual assertiveness of 'Panty Power' and the castration imagery of the suitor's severed head. But the zest and wit of the story-telling are warming and encouraging for women who like to feel that their daughters are cheerfully in control. 'Princess Curly Locks' ends in a conventional happy-ever-after wedding, like half the other stories (11 out of 23) in the tomboy princess group, but the heroine does the choosing and the ensuing marriage will presumably be conducted on her terms.

Looking at the other major categories, it appears that the standard fairy-stories held little interest for the girls. However, if you add to this small number (five) the 'domestic' and 'moral' tales (11), which tend to adhere to traditional gender behaviour, this broader grouping accounts for 30% of the girls' total output. By no means all the girls wanted to identify with tough princesses.

Indeed, it could be objected that the popularity of the tomboy princess choice was inevitable, since several models of upside-down stories with strong princesses had been put before the class in the session immediately before the story-writing. (No one thought to turn a wicked stepmother into a heroine, possibly for lack of a prototype in the tales we discussed.) However, it was overwhelmingly the girls who took up the idea; only two boys presented tomboy princesses in a positive light, and two boys were markedly hostile to the idea (see Appendix 1 for an amusing and worrying example!).

There was a closer tie between pictures and stories where the boys were concerned. A high proportion (25%) took every opportunity to introduce macho behaviour or bloody events into their writing. But an equally significant number (23%) told fairy-tales with traditional characters and plots, keeping to the old gender roles, and obviously identifying with the hero. The author in the following tale of 'The Tough Prince' slipped without noticing from 'the Prince' to 'I':

> . . . As he got closer he saw a goblin, and it said, 'I will cambom you and your head will fly high into the sky.' Then there was punch, pow and crash—the goblin was on the floor . . . When he came across a princess, the princess said, 'Are you here to take me away to be married?' 'No,' said the prince, 'I am out to look for a rich and pretty princess, not an ugly princess', and he carried on walking through the forest and saw a 3,000 foot high tower! I followed a flight of spiral stairs. I got halfway and I heard a loud scream and then a 'hah, hah, hah.' I ran up the rest of the way. I came to a wooden door. I look[ed] through

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> the keyhole and I saw a wicked witch. I burst down the door and rescued the princess and killed the witch and lived happily ever after.

This is the stuff of the classic fairy tale, re-imagined from the prince's point of view; it is also, of course, what little boys' science fiction, comic strips and video games are made of.

(d) Conclusions

This numerical analysis of the children's pictures and stories points to certain tentative interpretations. Although, on the evidence of their pictures, the immediate reactions of both girls and boys to familiar fairy stories were uncritical, a more complex and considered response emerged in the girls' writing. I am not maintaining that any of these activities were innocent. The girls who happily exploited the pictorial qualities of long hair and lovely frocks with their traditional princesses were doubtless simultaneously indulging deeper yearnings towards femininity. But on reflection girls generally rejected the frilly female image, and on getting a choice between sweet and tough princesses (and the greater freedom of the medium of writing), a sizeable proportion of the girls opted eagerly for the independent, strong-minded and active heroine. A good number did turn their tales in the direction of traditional female virtues, but they did not on the whole adopt the conventional fairy-tale pattern to express this bias.

The boys, on the other hand, seemed much happier with the traditional pattern of fairy-tales. (Interestingly the highest proportion of 'straight' stories came from the boys at a middle-class school, where the class held the most liberal and advanced views on gender roles; it is possible that the real reason for the conventional bias in their stories was their well-trained obedience in carrying out a classroom exercise.) Many of the boys revelled in embellishments from other media where macho heroes, vicious enemies and bloody confrontations are staple ingredients. The boys' imaginative world seemed much more straightforward than the girls'—still black-and-white, with gender traits to match. We can speculate that they had little incentive to alter the standard fairy-tale structure, beyond enriching the mixture with added violence, because they had more to lose than gain from the changes. Independent princesses might be a risk, even a threat, and get in the way of the hero continuing to do as he liked. Again, there is an alternative explanation: some of the boys could have been at an earlier stage in their intellectual development, not yet ready to introduce contradictions and real-life observations into their writing. But it seems more likely, taking into account all the elements in the contrasting story patterns between the sexes, together with the boys' conviction that they were better off than the girls in real life, that the boys had more of a vested interest than the girls in sticking to fairy-tale stereotypes.

So when young girls look into that fairy-tale mirror, what do they see? In the context of the 1970s critique of patriarchy, it seemed plausible that girls were gazing at a prettified version of themselves and aspiring to live the life of that beautiful glassy princess, just as they supposedly looked into mirrors as they put on their make-up and hoped to bring themselves closer to the image of femininity that their culture created. But the findings of this project insist that reading children's minds is more problematic than reading fairy-tales. We have imagined what girls and boys see in the magic mirror, but our vision is not theirs. Have children changed since the 1970s? (This is one plausible explanation, as many middle-aged women remember themselves as wanting to be princesses at the age of 10.) Or is it our willingness to listen to them that is different?

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What we can conclude with some certainty from this research is that Cornish girls now are 'resisting readers', to borrow a term from feminist literary criticism (Fetterley, 1978), able to criticise and manipulate (as well as enjoy) the gender images presented to them in the dominant fairy tales of our culture. On this evidence, we should be worrying about the effect of fairy-tale stereotypes not upon our daughters, but upon our sons.

Feminist Reflections

In the course of this project, which has its roots in feminist ideology, I have sometimes asked myself whether I am 'doing feminist research' (Roberts, 1981; Fonow & Cook, 1991). In three specific ways, I believe I am. It is fundamental to feminism that we should continue to challenge firmly-held assumptions, including our own, and look afresh at 1970s theories in the context of 1990s society: this article has a small place in that large field of enquiry. There are also two premises hidden behind my project's design that seem to be in keeping with recent trends in feminist thinking. The first is my suspicion that I would find resistance in my schoolgirl readers, if I looked carefully enough; the second is my decision to check this out by working with the readers themselves.

Our awareness of the subtle strategies of female resistance to the 'patriarchal plot' has grown enormously over the past 10 years. In the 1980s, sociologists began to claim from their research findings that the complexity of women's socialisation had been underestimated. They complained about feminist researchers' assumption that stereotyped sex-role messages were successful in moulding female behaviour (Anyon, 1983, p. 19), and argued that it was time "to move on from the frequent portrayal of the female as subordinate and oppressed, towards a demonstration of the creative possibilities in female resistance" (Davies, 1983, p. 39). By the mid-1980s, feminist attitudes towards women as readers had also shifted, away from a model of passive dependency on a Mills & Boon culture and towards an understanding of women's active uses of popular reading material. Researchers began to show a greater respect for the multiple functions of a range of popular texts, from schoolgirl stories to Daphne du Maurier (Frith, 1985; Light 1984, 1991; see Taylor 1989a for a useful survey of the field). Crucially, methods have changed alongside theories, drawing ideas from reader-response criticism and from cultural and educational studies. In the past decade, there have been a number of sympathetic attempts to find out the facts from readers themselves, including Janice Radway's influential study of a community of romance readers in the American Mid-West (Radway, 1984), Helen Taylor's employment of questionnaires to explore the diverse meanings that *Gone With the Wind* holds for its female fans (Taylor, 1989b), and Gemma Moss's analysis of the creative writing of secondary school students to assess teenage girls' uses of romance (Moss, 1989). My fairy-tale project makes another contribution to this jigsaw of readers' responses.

In other respects, though, I cannot claim that this paper is fully 'feminist research' at its best. I have answered the question I posed myself, but in a one-dimensional form, while the children's material cries out for the kind of leisurely reflection bestowed by Carolyn Steedman on a single story by a group of 8-year-old girls in her superb study of *The Tidy House* (1982). Of course the cramped space of a single article is not the place to take my analysis further. It would be feasible to write a separate case study, focusing on the specific uses of the story-telling exercise by one of my groups of working-class girls. This would draw out many issues not covered in this initial survey, making more sophisticated use of models of children's psychological development and highlighting some interesting differences between the schools that are not revealed by statistical

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summaries. But only an extension of the entire project, following the children outside the school gates and beginning to map their larger social and imaginative worlds, could begin to capture some of the relevant data that I feel feminists need to do justice to their sons and daughters.

Fairy-Tale and the Future

I met many people during this project who felt that my concern about fairy-tale was out of date. Teachers claim that many children do not encounter traditional tales at home and have to be taught them as part of their education. Therefore, the argument runs, as the stories are not an integral part of their culture, they are unlikely to be at risk from this quarter; it is time to turn our attention to other media, especially magazines and video films, where different and more damaging narrative forms are having a far more potent influence on gender expectations and behaviour.

This view of fairy-tale seems to me to underestimate its continuing power. All the children I encountered were familiar with the main stories under scrutiny, and often knew several versions. They are also under perpetual siege from the subtler forms of the Cinderella syndrome endemic in our culture, from classic novels and televised films to advertisements, beauty competitions, comics and newspapers. A personal anecdote may help to illustrate the connection between the conservatism of fairy-tales and the kind of British conservatism represented by our tabloid press: in 1989, a discreetly advertised university day school on 'Fairy-tales and Feminists' landed me in several newspapers, including page 3 of *The Sun*, the page layout of these papers demonstrating clear connections between protecting fairy-tales and promoting nubile dollies and glamorous beauty queens (Colaco, 1991). Snow White is not dead, and saccharine princesses with their glazed smiles are still on prominent display on children's bookshelves and adult news-stands.

Banning *Snow White* is impossible, as progressive parents have found; once back in the real world of their peers, our children are inevitably exposed to the old stories, and even accuse their parents of keeping the truth about fiction from them. Children's resistance to these pressures can best be encouraged by making them familiar with alternative gender images, including upside-down fairy-tales (has anyone got a convincing way of helping boys to identify with caring princes?), and by increasing their understanding of the ways in which cultural forms like the fairy-tale create sex stereotypes. Retelling fairy-stories in the classroom is one useful starting point: if children can create princesses who free themselves from the tower, they may be developing ways of thinking that will help them to combat more insidious attempts to keep women and men locked in restrictive social roles.

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Spelling and punctuation have been silently normalised, and the occasional word supplied in brackets, in transcribing the children's work.

Correspondence: Ella Westland, Department of Continuing and Adult Education, University of Exeter, Hayne Corfe Centre, Sunningdale, Truro, Cornwall, United Kingdom.

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Appendix 1: Two Stories of Tomboy Princesses

1. 'Princess Curly Locks and the Princes!' by Sarah (age 11) from a small rural school

Princess Curly Locks sat at the top of a tree and took out a pen knife and carved: 'I own this tree' in big letters so everyone could see it. The King and Queen saw the writing and demanded to know who did it. Princess Curly Locks said that she had done it because she owned that tree.

[ILLUSTRATION: Princess up her tree, wearing blouse and jeans, smiling cheerfully, with a cat on the ground looking up at her.]

The King and Queen sent her to her room and said, "You shall not come out of your room until you are ready to marry a fine prince." Princess Curly Locks went to her room. The King and Queen rang every prince they knew that wanted to marry the princess and were told to come over straight away and ask her hand in marriage. Lots of princes came and they brought gifts of gold and silver. All the princes were told to wait in the garden and one at a time they would go and see the princess in her room.

[ILLUSTRATION: Queen saying, "Go to your room"; Princess responding, "oh".]

Prince Bottomweight went to the princess's room first and asked her hand in marriage but as he said that he tripped over a rug and fell out of a window.

[ILLUSTRATION: Prince B. in suit and top hat is heading out through the window, while the princess, now wearing a long dress with puffed sleeves and a ribbon round the waist, is laughing, "ha ha ha".]

Prince Dumpy-Wumpy was the next to try. He had been practising all day what to say. He walked into the princess's room and said, "Like me to give you kiss me?" "What a nutter," said the princess and drew a sword from her pants and said "PANTY POWER!" and chopped off Prince Dumpy-Wumpy's head and opened the door and it rolled down the stairs and the princess said, "Cor what a lot of cheap ketchup" and she threw the body out of the window.

[ILLUSTRATION: Princess standing up smiling with blood dripping off the short sword; below her is the prince's head, dripping blood into a puddle on the floor; his body is disappearing out of the window, bottom left.]

A young prince saw the body fly out of the window and shouted, "Princess Curly Locks is a killer. Run!" All the princes ran except a very handsome prince. He got on his horse and looked around.

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[ILLUSTRATION: Horse with ornate saddle; prince standing next to it grinning, in a top saying 'hitec' and trousers saying 'jeans'.]

Princess Curly Locks saw the prince and said to herself, "Cor, what a guy." She jumped out of the window and ran to him and said, "Will you marry me?" "Of course I will," said the prince and they lived happily ever after.

[ILLUSTRATION: This time it is the princess jumping out of the window on the left, saying, "Well here goes." On the right of the picture the couple hold hands.]

[FINAL FULL-PAGE ILLUSTRATION: Conventional wedding with the princess in pastel bridal gown, still smiling, and the prince (slightly smaller, standing a little behind her) in suit, bow-tie and top hat.]

[COVER ILLUSTRATION FOR THE BOOKLET: Below the title is the princess in her room, this time painted in a long pink dress; the window is a prominent feature, with a view of a field and a passing tractor. She is smiling, and pointing a dagger towards the severed head of the prince.]

2. *'Prince Smartypants'* (an inversion *of Princess Smartypants* by Babette Cole, [1986]) by Ryan (age 10) from a working-class school

Once upon a time there was a beautiful prince that did not marry. But the King and Queen told the prince [he] must marry or else he would be locked in a pink room for 5 days. The prince hated pink so he had to go along with the King and Queen. The prince only agreed to get married if they [the princesses] went round all the obstacles. The obstacles were his wolf, his dragon, his shark [and] all his other horrible pets. The day came [and] there were only 7 princesses outside. The first one set off but got eaten by the wolf. The second was too scared and all the others were too except one. She went [and] beat the wolf, played tiddlywinks with the dragon, ate his shark and all the others. The prince didn't like this so he ran away. But everywhere that he went she went so the prince killed himself. But so did the princess so the prince never got rid of her.

Appendix 2: Examples of Upside-down and 'Clever Gretchen' Fairy Tales

Read or circulated in class during the project. (Publication details in Bibliography)

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